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SUBJECT: DOMESTIC ELECTION MONITORS GEARING UP

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11. (SBU) Summary: Egyptian civil society is preparing to monitor the upcoming presidential and parliamentary campaigns and elections. USG funding is playing a key role in this process. Many challenges remain, but available information suggests that the upcoming elections will receive more scrutiny than any previous Egyptian elections. End summary.

12. (SBU) With the presidential election campaign due to start on August 17 and conclude on September 4, and the election itself set for September 7, several dozen Egyptian civil society groups--many of which are legally registered with the Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs as formal NGOs--are organizing themselves to monitor the campaign and the election. The groups, which are organized in four major coalitions, also monitor the upcoming parliamentary campaign and elections, which will likely occur in October and November.

13. (SBU) The four separate coalitions are led by civil society groups that are well and favorably known to the Embassy. They are grouped around several leading Egyptian civil society organizations (and personalities) including the following:

--Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR), headed by Hafez Abu Seada, leads a collection of approximately twenty civil society groups;
--the Ibn Khaldoun Center (IKC), headed by Saad Eddin Ibrahim, leads a group of about ten organizations;
--the Human Rights Association for the Assistance of Prisoners (HRAAP), headed by Mohammed Zarai, and the Group for Democratic Development (GDD), headed by Negad El-Borai, lead a group of four organizations;
--and finally, the Arab Center for the Independence of the Judiciary (ACIJ), headed by Nasser Amin, which has recently separated from the HRAAP-GDD coalition, and plans to conduct its work independently.

14. (SBU) The reasons for the multiple coalitions are not entirely clear, but appear to be driven by such issues as conflicting personalities and philosophies. Also at issue is the matter of "foreign funding." Both the EOHR coalition and ACIJ have declined to seek foreign funding for their monitoring activities. This decision does not appear to be driven by xenophobia--both groups have cordial and close relationships with Cairo's diplomatic community, including embassies--but rather by a desire to avoid giving ammunition to critics, both in the GOE and in the yellow press, who regularly raise the specter of "foreign interference." In contrast to EOHR and ACIJ, the IKC and HRAAP-GDD groups have had no qualms about accepting support from the USG (both USAID and MEPI funds) for their activities.

15. (SBU) The legal status of domestic observers/monitors is not certain. While they are not specifically outlawed under Egyptian law, they are not provided with any explicit protection or authority to carry out their work. In the 1995 and 2000 parliamentary elections, domestic monitors cobbled together their monitoring efforts based on observation of public spaces, and securing access to some polling places as legal agents of the candidates themselves, who are authorized under Egyptian polling regulations to have agents present in the polling stations. According to various domestic monitoring activists, they are now seeking to ensure their access to the polling stations through similar arrangements, and through direct appeals to the GOE and the Elections Commissions, but they are also preparing to conduct exit polling if access to the stations is denied.

16. (SBU) The National Democratic Institute, which has received funding from USAID and has been operating from a Cairo office for the past month, reports that it has made its training and other capacity support available to all interested groups. Many of the groups are availing themselves of NDI's assistance, but several have declined the NDI assistance because they do not wish to accept foreign support. Significantly, however, some of the groups that have refused to accept direct USG funding support have

expressed an interest in attending NDI's training workshops and using its Arabic language manuals and monitoring checklists. NDI tells us that they believe it feasible that Egyptian civil society can muster three thousand short-term observers to monitor both election days, as well as several hundred long-term observers to cover both campaign periods. NDI notes that funding for travel and per-diem of observers may be a limiting factor. NDI is assisting those groups that are willing to apply for funding from the USG and other donors.

¶7. (SBU) The timing of Egypt's 2005 polls presents at least one interesting prospect, from a monitoring perspective. The IKC-led group conducted a monitoring exercise of the May 25 referendum (ref B) which has helped it refine its approach to monitoring the looming September 7 presidential election. Similarly, representatives of several of the groups have noted that they hope that their experiences with the September 7 election (which will be the first monitoring work for most of the groups) will prepare them to monitor better the parliamentary elections, expected to take place in November.

¶8. (SBU) In addition, the quasi-governmental National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) has announced plans to support elections monitoring through the opening of an operations room to monitor the campaigns and elections, the establishment of a hotline for complaints, and the training of journalists in coverage of the process.

¶9. (SBU) Finally, looming over the issue of domestic monitoring remains the unresolved issue of judicial supervision of the polling places (ref A). Several thousand dissident judges affiliated with the Judges' Club announced in May that they would refuse to carry out constitutionally mandated supervision of the upcoming elections unless the GOE met their demands of legal and financial independence from the executive branch. These dissidents said they would only supervise the polls if they had guarantees that their efforts would not be part of a sham process. The dissident judges undertook to meet in early September to make a final decision about supervision of the polls. Notwithstanding the judges' threat, the People's Assembly concluded its session in July without acting on the draft legislation demanded by the judges. The GOE, and the Supreme Judicial Council (which answers to the Ministry of Justice, and thus to the executive branch) has periodically sought to make the case that judges and other Ministry of Justice employees will supervise the polls, but there remains a significant chance that many judges will boycott the poll supervision.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: The upcoming elections are unprecedented by Egyptian standards for a number of reasons. Significantly, the attention that they have attracted from domestic civil society monitors, the judiciary, and the media means that they will certainly receive more scrutiny than any previous Egyptian elections.

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